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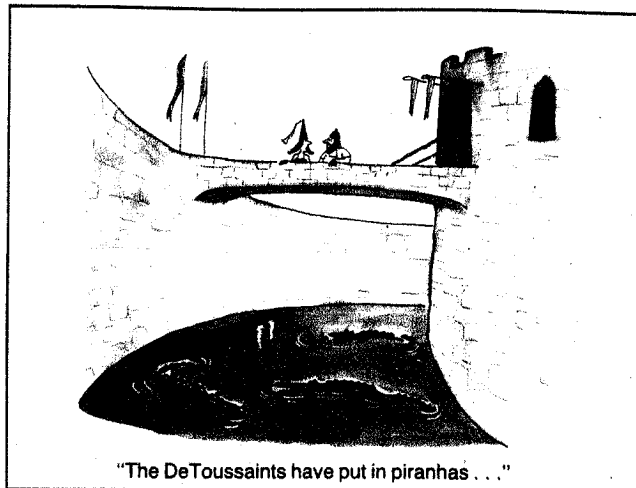
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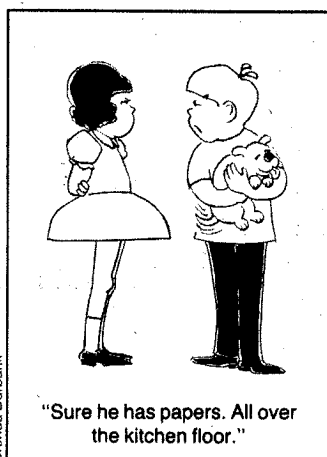
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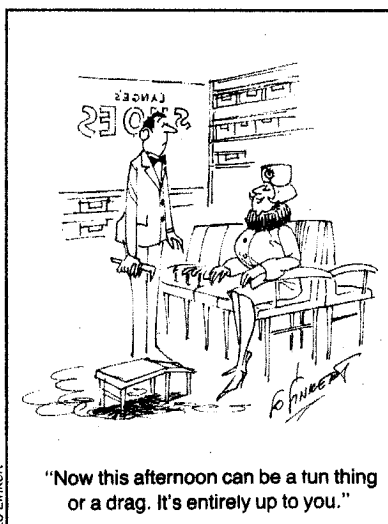
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Wed. 18	Thurs. 19	Fri. 20	March Sat. 21	Sun. 22	Mon. 23	Tues. 24
1st electric shavers on sale, 1931	Daylight Savings Time 1st used 1918	Spring begins	Jefferson becomes 1st Secretary of State, 1790	1st American Nursing School, 1861	... give me liberty speech, 1775	Next issue of Woman's World on sale



This Gun for Hire

by Jack Ritchie

As all of my victims are, George Franklin was considerably surprised and shocked to see me sitting there in one of his armchairs holding the .45 automatic.

He glanced at the wall light switch still at his fingertips, wondering, perhaps, whether if he flipped the switch back to "off" I might disappear.

I indicated another armchair. "Please come in and close the door behind you. Sit down."

He did as he was told and then asked the first pertinent question. "What is this? A robbery?"

I smiled. "No, this is not a robbery."

He hesitated to take another guess, so I filled him in.

"I am here to kill you," I said.

He exhibited predictable shock. "Kill me? But why? I've never seen you before in my life."

I allowed another smile. "Actually, I don't particularly want to kill you. I have nothing against you personally. I regard this merely as a matter of business. I am simply doing a job for which I was hired."

His eyes were wide. "You're a professional killer?"

I nodded.

Franklin licked his lips. "Who hired you? My wife?"

I raised an eyebrow. "Would she want you dead?"

He considered the question. "Well, we don't get along too well, but still I think it's going a little too far to..."

"It is not your wife."

He made another try. "That damn son-in-law of mine? He'd like to see me

dead, I'll bet you anything."

I sighed. "Far be it for me to create dissension or suspicion within a family. No, the individual who commissioned me is not from your immediate family, or, as far as I'm aware, even a distant relative."

"Then who hired you?"

"I cannot give you his name. A matter of professional ethics, you know. But, believe me, it's of no consequence. It's possible you don't even remember him. After all, it goes back a number of years."

He frowned, seemingly scanning his past for clues.

I, of course, always do considerable research about my victims before I finally choose to confront them. So there was very little I couldn't tell you about this man.

George Channing Franklin deals in large-lot real estate—suburban developments and the like. During the course of the years, his name has appeared frequently in the newspapers, never with laudatory intent. He has been indicted three times for questionable practices, including the bribery of public officials. But for all the accusations, he has yet to spend a day in jail.

I smiled again. "I do meet some rather strange people in my profession. People who carry grudges for years and years, and then suddenly feel the need to 'express' themselves. Or possibly it is just that they've never had the opportunity to meet someone like me before. I help them express desires long buried."

Franklin scowled at me. "Swenson? Is that who it is? There was nothing illegal in what I did. It was business. He took his chances and I took mine."

"No. It is not Swenson."

"McClintock? He doesn't have a cent more coming to him. He was lucky I gave him that five grand out of the goodness of my heart."

I held up a hand. "I do not intend to let you take me on a tour through your list of enemies. I simply will not reveal the identity of my employer. Nothing you say will make me change my mind."

That path being closed, he now tried another. "How much... how much

did this unknown person pay you to kill me?"

I shrugged. "I suppose it won't do any harm to tell you. Five thousand dollars."

His jaw dropped. "Five thousand? A lousy five thousand dollars?"

I regarded him archly. "My dear sir, five thousand dollars may be lousy to you, but I assure you that it is not lousy to me."

He quickly apologized. "I didn't mean to insult you. I just meant why settle for five thousand dollars when you can make double that?"

"Double?"

Now he smiled for the first time. "Suppose I gave you ten thousand dollars then to kill me?"

I regarded the offer and rubbed my jaw. "There is the matter of ethics. I made a bargain. I gave my word."

"In cash," he said swiftly. He went to the wall and pushed aside a painting to reveal a wall safe. He began dialing. "I've got the money in my safe. In my business you sometimes find that you need ready cash for emergencies."

He pulled an envelope out of the safe and emptied its contents on the cocktail table in front of me. "Ten thousand. Count it."

I counted the bills, and sure enough, there were one hundred one-hundred-dollar bills in the stack. While I was counting, I was also thinking.

When I was finished, I stared at the money and then finally sighed. I put the bills back into the envelope and the envelope into the pocket of my suit jacket.

Franklin rubbed his hands. "Now maybe you'll tell me who hired you."

I shook my head. "Sir, you bought your life. But no amount of money will draw the name of my client out of me. After all, I do still have some sense of ethics left."

He studied me. "But that leaves me with a problem."

"Problem? What problem?"

"What is to prevent this unnamed client of yours from hiring someone else to kill me?"

I thought about that. "Nothing really."

He went back to the safe and returned with another fat envelope.

Just how many of those envelopes did he have in that safe, I wondered. For a moment I was tempted to find out, but then I changed my mind. It just wasn't my style.

"Ten thousand more," Franklin said. "Keep your ethics. I don't need his name. But if this mystery man can hire you to kill me, why can't I hire you to kill him? I mean fair is fair, isn't it? And I pay more. A lot more."

I sighed heavily and slipped the second envelope into my pocket. "I assure you that if I didn't need the money so badly, I wouldn't for one moment consider..."

"Sure," he said, not waiting for me to finish. "Sure."

I put my automatic on the small table next to me and rose to slip back into my topcoat.

Franklin's hand moved swiftly. In a flash he had seized the gun, and now he pointed it at me.

My heart began to race, but then I quickly pulled myself together and smiled faintly. "That was awfully careless of me."

He agreed. "How does it feel to have the gun pointing at you for a change?"

Yes, I thought, one must admit that there is quite a difference between pointing and being pointed at.

"Sit down," he commanded.

I debated the order for a moment and then decided to sit.

"I could shoot you right where you are. I don't think I'd have any trouble explaining to the police."

I sat there as the seconds ticked away, wondering if he really would pull the trigger. "Suppose you do kill me, wouldn't that be quite counterproductive? My death would still leave someone out there who wants to kill you enough to pay for it. He will simply hire someone else who might not give you the opportunity to negotiate."

That reminded him and he tried again. "All right, who hired you to kill me?"

I smiled thinly. "Even under the circumstances my lips are sealed."

He studied me for a few moments. "I've been

thinking things over. You might be just the kind of person I've been looking for all my life. Money can buy a lot of people, but not all of them. Here and there I meet someone who gets in the way, if you know what I mean. Yes, I think you might help me. I'll pay twenty thousand for each job. I think that's generous."

I indicated the gun he held. "Then why are you still pointing that thing at me?"

He dismissed the situation. "Just a reflex action. I saw the gun laying there and so I grabbed it."

He handed the automatic back to me. "Where can I get in touch with you when I need you?"

"I will get in touch with you. Whenever you're ready to do business, simply insert an item in the personal column of the newspaper: All is forgiven, come home, Ralph. I'll make contact with you immediately after the item appears."

When I returned to my hotel, I slipped the automatic back into my suitcase. Having it on my person made me nervous, even though I knew it wasn't loaded. I smiled in guilty embarrassment. Knowing that it was unloaded had accounted for my coolness when the gun was pointed at me. I wondered for a moment how I would have reacted if the weapon had contained cartridges—rather badly, I'm afraid. I'm not at all a brave man, though I did rather enjoy playing the role. And I would never answer that silly ad in the personal column should Franklin ever care to insert it.

As a matter of fact, I would leave town immediately. I have no wish even to be in the same city with a man as ruthless as Franklin. I have never murdered anyone in my life and I have no intention of ever doing so. However, in this uncertain world, one must turn a dollar to keep body and soul together, and there is in the process more than one way to skin a cat—or fleece a sheep. And I felt that some sheep like Franklin did so justly deserve to be fleeced.